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Post-racial public relations on primetime television: How *Scandal* represents Olivia Pope

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ABSTRACT

Scandal follows the fast-paced fictional world of Olivia Pope, an attorney, crisis management expert, and former White House communications director who owns and manages her own public relations agency. As the first U.S. network television drama with an African American woman in the lead role since 1965, *Scandal* represents a step forward for televisual portrayals of African-American women. Nevertheless, this program recirculates common constructions of race and gender. I use a cultural studies framework to interrogate representations in the post-racial world Olivia Pope navigates, through the lens of *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989). Findings reveal that the representational reality of *Scandal* is decidedly different from the lived reality of public relations professionals.

1. Introduction

In 2012, ABC launched the first U.S. network television drama with an African American woman in the lead role since *Get Christie Love* in 1965 entitled *Scandal*. The show centers around the life of Olivia Pope, an attorney, crisis management expert, and former White House communications director who owns and manages her own public relations agency. The central scandal is the fact that Olivia is a single, African American woman having an affair with the married, White, Republican President of the United States. A real woman who broke through racial and gender barriers in the George Bush White House, Judy Smith, inspired the program. Other than Judy insisting that Olivia be portrayed by a Black woman ([Inside a scandal, 2012](#)), race is rarely included in the program narrative. The markers of identity that typify Black culture such as “linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing and talking” ([Hall, 1993](#), p. 109), are largely missing from *Scandal*.

Although *Scandal* is a step forward for televisual portrayals of African-American women, I assert that this program recirculates common constructions of Blackness. I examine in particular the problematic ways that race is represented and misrepresented in the post-racial world Olivia Pope navigates, through the lens of *intersectionality*, the ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple-dimensionality of Black women’s experiences ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)).

2. Sociopolitical context

Scandal cannot be fully understood without consideration of the social context in which it—and its viewers—exist. During the 2016 summer hiatus, the then-Republican nominee for United States (U.S.) now-President Donald Trump gained national news exposure by castigating Muslims, Mexicans, immigrants, and African-Americans. Simultaneously, the killings of unarmed African-American citizens prompted the Black Lives Matter movement to hold marches, demonstrations, and protests throughout the U.S.

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Despite Olivia Pope's proximity to the criminal justice system from the highest rungs of the U.S. government, race-relevant issues exist on the margins of her world. *Scandal* is thus worthy of research because it conveys the continuous tensions of race relations in the United States.

3. Media representations of reality

3.1. Representations of public relations

Societal understanding of the public relations profession is already fraught. Public relations practitioners in film and fiction have been presented as alternately ditzzy, manipulative and predatory; isolated, and unfulfilled among a host of other unflattering character traits (Miller, 1999). Scholarship has also revealed remarkable demographic homogeneity in public relations characters. Practitioners on television are typically White, mid-to-upper-income, women in their 30s and 40s (Fitch, 2015; Johnston, 2010; Yoon & Black, 2011). Johnston found that men outnumbered women in her analysis of public relations roles, and male managers granted the power that women characters held. Fitch (2015) also found conflicting constructions of female public relations practitioners in the HBO series *True Blood*. Analysis of the series' fictional public relations campaign revealed that powerful female practitioners functioned in a *postfeminist* society that normalized traditional gender roles.

3.2. Media representations of African-American characters

Media representations of Black women complicate how Olivia Pope is constructed as a public relations professional. An African American female boss is a relatively new phenomenon in U.S. network television. African Americans cast in leadership occupations usually have secondary roles (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2015; Mascaro, 2005; Samuels, 2013; Springer, 2007). Representations of marginalized individuals often fall back on common cultural constructions (Dubrofsky, 2013; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008).

Stereotypes distinctive to Black women include the *superwoman* who ably juggles multiple professional and personal responsibilities as a high achieving, selfless, go-to person (Wallace, 1978), the hypersexual *Jezebel* Black woman, defined by her sexual prowess, and the *mammy* who maintains rigid social decorum, is asexual, and remains loyal to her [White] employers (Collins, 1999, 2000). When Springer (2007) analyzed Black women in post-racial popular culture, she found the *bitter black woman*, whose workplace success has come at the expense of racial identity and self-esteem.

Media texts articulate societal rules, norms, and power structures, that is, *ideology*. It is important to consider the ideological messages that scholars have uncovered in their analyses of *Scandal* thus far.

3.3. Representational reality on *Scandal*

At the time of this writing, academics have published little research about *Scandal*. Indeed, one has to look far beyond social sciences to locate work. I include next a brief summation to situate the study in academic context.

Scholars assert that, because of the small number of roles for women of color, Olivia Pope stands in for all African American women. That rarity grants program producers the freedom to develop a brand new character as well as the responsibility to present her in a way that does not denigrate the race (or gender).

Scandal perpetuates the ideology that the U.S. has overcome its racial inequities existing in a *post-racial* society (Mukherjee, 2016). The program thus presents "a depiction of a fictional United States where blacks and whites work together constructively, that is situated, by and large, beyond issues of racial inequality" (Erigha, 2015, p. 11).

Paradoxically, scholars have also uncovered ideological messages about Black women that *amplify* racial and gender differences. Olivia embodies the *Jezebel* stereotype (Cartier, 2014; Chaney & Robertson, 2016). Racialized and sexualized constructions of Black women have led to unrealistic presentations of Black womanhood, according to Pixley (2015).

By also eschewing such stereotypes (e.g., Griffin, 2015), *Scandal* conveys implicit behavioral norms via characters' respectability. The role of Olivia Pope is inexorably linked to race and gender.

4. Theory

I employ *intersectionality* as a lens through which to interrogate representations in *Scandal*. Intersectionality originated from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) explanation of the conflicting dynamics of race and gender in antidiscrimination contexts and social movements. Racism and sexism intersect in the lives of real people; for example, privileged men at the forefront of anti-racist movements and privileged women at the forefront of feminist movements marginalize women of color. These women can be equally concerned with, say, voting rights laws affecting minority communities and reproductive rights issues favored by a given candidate. Society categorizes race and gender as mutually exclusive, inadequately addressing their intersecting identities; intersectionality foregrounds the standpoints of women of color by treating race and gender as a multidimensional phenomenon. *Representational intersectionality* is the cultural construction of women of color whereby the media ignore their intersectional interests, reproducing racial and gender hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1991). Studies about representations of Black women in popular culture tend to ignore their intersectional interests. Too, intersectionality has been underutilized for analyses of televised media representations of marginalized characters (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013).

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